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RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 7810  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 0574  
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RUEAWJC/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY  
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SUBJECT: ARMY FINDS UNION LEADER IN FARC CAMP

SUMMARY

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¶1. Colombian troops captured labor leader Juan Efrain Mendoza in the same February 27 raid that netted Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) commander Bernardo Mosquera Machado ("Negro Antonio"). Mendoza initially tried to flee the soldiers, but later claimed the FARC had kidnapped him. GOC officials have cast doubt on Mendoza's story, saying that he still had his GOC-provided cell phone and that neither his family nor his union had reported him missing. The parent organization of Mendoza's union publicly stated that Mendoza needed to fully explain his presence in the FARC camp and called on the Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia) to investigate. End Summary.

GOVERNMENT-PROTECTED UNIONIST IN FARC CAMP

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¶2. The Colombian Army captured Juan Efrain Mendoza, secretary general of the National Federation of Agricultural Unions (Fensuagro) in a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) camp in Sumapaz (Cundinamarca) during a February 27 operation that captured FARC commander and feared kidnapper Bernardo Mosquera Machado ("Negro Antonio"). The military reported that Mendoza initially tried to flee the soldiers, then claimed after his capture that he had been kidnapped by the insurgents and brought to the camp. Mendoza will remain in GOC custody pending investigation by judicial authorities of his "changing story."

¶3. Social Protection Minister Diego Palacio Betancourt asked the United Workers Confederation (CUT--Colombia's largest labor confederation)--of which Fensuagros is a member--to cooperate in the investigation. According to Palacio, the GOC had provided Mendoza bodyguards. Mendoza denied receiving bodyguards, but Justice and Interior Minister (MOIJ) Fabio Valencia Cossio explained on March 3 that Mendoza and other Fensuagro leaders were in fact protected under the MOIJ's protection program for human rights activists, labor leaders and other at-risk individuals. Palacio said that Mendoza, the CUT, and Fensuagro needed to explain how one of its members in the GOC protection program could have ended up meeting with the FARC. The GOC currently provides bodyguards to approximately 1,500 unionists.

GOC CASTS DOUBT ON ALIBI

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¶4. Mendoza claimed that he had been kidnapped in Bogota on February 25th and that he tried to flee because he feared

being caught in a crossfire in the raid. He reiterated that he did not receive any GOC protection. Palacio and other GOC officials publicly cast doubt on this account, noting that he was in possession of his GOC-provided cell phone when he was taken into custody and that neither his family nor Fensuagro had reported his alleged kidnapping. (Note: Fensuagro member Liliana Obando is in prison awaiting trial after computer files found at the camp of deceased FARC leader "Raul Reyes" identified her as a member of the FARC's international front. Press reports on March 3 suggest that the same files show ties between Mendoza and the FARC. End note.)

15. CUT President Tarsicio Mora would not vouch for Mendoza, telling the media Mendoza needed to clarify his presence in the camp and that the Prosecutor General (Fiscalia) should fully investigate the case. Mora told Radio "W" that Mendoza would have to answer to judicial authorities, who would ultimately determine why he was there. Mora denied any CUT connections to illegal armed groups, and he condemned violence.

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